



DROP IN AND HANG OUT

Age-specific programming on a budget

In only two years, the Tumbleweed Recreation Center (TRC) and Environmental Education Center (EEC) in Chandler, Ariz., have become venues for community meetings and family parties, informal gathering places and activity-filled forums for all ages. These multigenerational facilities were developed by the Chandler Community Services Department concurrently, and both held grand opening celebrations the same day—April 19, 2008.

Located in a central area of the city along a major freeway, the 62,000-square-foot TRC features a 6,000-square-foot fitness center with more than 44 pieces of exercise equipment, an indoor walking and jogging track, group exercise studios, gymnasium, game room, art classrooms, racquetball courts, teaching kitchen, room rentals and a childcare area.

The EEC, an 11,000-square-foot nature information facility surrounded by the 113-acre Veterans Oasis Park,

features an information desk, classrooms, exhibit areas and a nature store. All classes are geared toward environmental awareness, conservation and sustainable living practices. The topics covered range from bird watching and nature photography to astronomy.

After the successful launch of both centers, staff members set their sights on creating several new types of drop-in, low-cost activities and special events tailored to specific age groups. Here's an outline of recent programs:



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Preschool Activities

Adjacent to the preschool rooms at the TRC, the Tree House drop-in child-care room is for parents using the center or taking a class. It consists of assorted toys and an interactive video game area for children old enough to participate. To further serve parents and toddlers, additional drop-in activities are now held on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. The first program is "Tumble Tots," an indoor playground filled with toys and mats where parents and children under 5 years old meet new friends.

The second phase of toddler activities includes the Wednesday "Bubble Blast." Held in an outdoor courtyard equipped with a soft "tot turf" surface conducive to running and jumping, the activity is marked by two bubble-blowing machines on tables and a CD player for background music. The program initially attracted 20 to 30 parents and toddlers, and gradually increased to more than 125. The success of this activity spurred a second option called "Bikes, Bounce & Boogie," which is basically a bounce house surrounded by tricycles, hoops and balls with accompanying music.

Mother Nature's Story Time

The EEC has created a weekly "Mother Nature's Story Time" program for families, which has quickly become one of the most popular educational classes for toddlers. This is more than a standard "read-me-a-story" session; instead, children listen to an instructor read two or three books before engaging in a craft, game or guided nature walk. The books and hands-on activities all have a central theme. The most popular is the "Cactus-Tasting Party," which proves to be a great way to teach preschoolers about this quintessential desert symbol.

Teen Activities

The TRC offers two youth and teen activity rooms—the Game Pod and Hay Loft. Teenagers looking for a place to unleash creative energy find no shortage of options with "exergaming" in the Game Pod—an arcade with Nintendo, PlayStation, Dance Dance Revolution and



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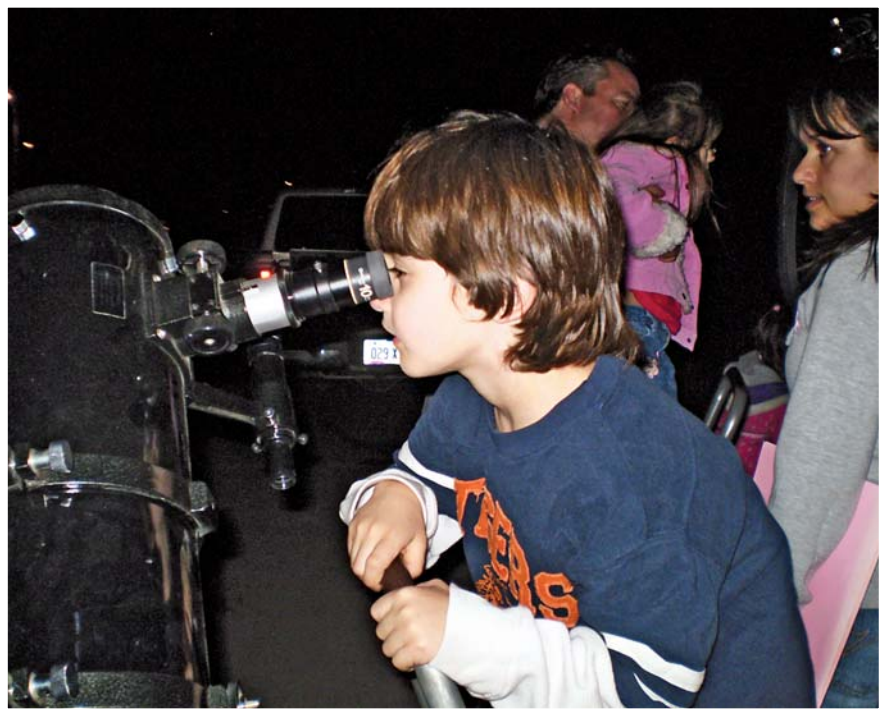
Drop In And Hang Out

the basketball “pop-a-shot.” The Hay Loft is a lounge complete with air hockey, foosball and Guitar Hero. Computers are available to surf the Internet or to do homework. A source of pride for teens is a collection of junior-high and high-school logos that adorn the walls. To leverage the popularity of these rooms, staff members have developed periodic contests in which participants earn points in different games; the winner receives a lunch pizza party at his or her school.

Green Teens

The EEC attracts many volunteers, including a group of teenagers who assist staff members on a weekly basis through the “Green Teens” program. One of the major tasks for this group is caring for the center’s resident animals, including snakes and scorpions, which have become favorites of visitors. Many teens also help during special events by conducting snake-feeding demonstrations or assisting with activities, crafts and games for parents and children. The EEC also partners with others

organizations, such as the East Valley Astronomy Club, Arizona Game and Fish Department to host stargazing nights, free fishing clinics, animal-care demonstrations and desert survival.



Family Activities

The TRC offers several ways for families to be active together. The “Baby-Buggy Brigade” morning group exercise class in the gymnasium each week allows mothers to work out with their strollers. The upstairs track is open for several “Family Walk Time” sessions when strollers and children are permitted in the fitness area; normally, only those 13 and older and who have completed the orientation are allowed.

For parents who work and can’t participate in morning drop-in pre-school activities, the TRC created “Family Night” last year that features a different theme every Wednesday, such as seasonal crafts, bounce-house activities, kid-friendly movies and family-fitness activities. This program has been well-received, and attendance grows from 20 to 50 whenever there is a featured guest from the Phoenix Zoo or a magician.

To encourage all members to set fitness goals, the first “TRC Daytona Challenge” was launched this winter in which 50 participants accumulated 500 combined miles of cardio exercise, walking and running over a six-week period. The fitness coordinator also initiated a partnership with the local branch of United Blood Services to co-host a blood drive every quarter.



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Outdoor Family Entertainment

One of the highlights of the EEC is the surrounding Veterans Oasis Park and its adjacent open-air amphitheater. Last fall, the "Sonoran Sunset Series" made its debut. This free, monthly outdoor entertainment series features unique and varied performers from local storytellers and a classical quartet to an energetic duo making music from recycled trash. The series runs from fall through spring and offers enjoyment to groups ranging from families of two to scout troops of 30 or more.

Monthly Birdwalks

Due to its climate and geographical location, Arizona is one of the best birding places in the country. On the first Saturday morning of the month from November through April, the EEC hosts bird walks. Guides lead groups for a one-hour hike to observe species in their habitat. More than 90 species have been spotted, ranging from hummingbirds to condors.

Birthday Parties

Both facilities offer children's birthday-party programs with themed activities. One of the biggest benefits of hosting birthday parties is for the parents who don't have to set up or clean up. Each party is designed for 60 minutes of activities and 30 to 60 minutes of celebration for the birthday boy or girl in a decorated gift room or park pavilion. The EEC's parties include different nature themes for children ages 3 to 12 that highlight gardening, animal crafts and scavenger hunts. These parties also have helped broaden the "nature IQ" of young residents.

Community Special Events

Both facilities also organize free special events for the public, including a holiday gift bazaar, health-and-wellness information fair and Earth Day expo. The events often include refreshments, prizes, activities or demonstrations. Last December, the TRC joined forces with the local fire department to be a drop-off location for its holiday toy drive to

provide underprivileged children in the community with gifts. Several hundred new toys were collected during the "Bubble Blast" in exchange for a ride on a fire engine.

Customer Input Valued

The community response to many of the programs has been positive. Even when some activities were canceled or slow to grow initially, staff members continued to offer them for several months before trying another concept. What's important is that the variety of activities keeps people coming back because they know with each new chapter in their lives, there's a program waiting for them. **PRB**

Liam O'Mahony is an Information Specialist with the Chandler Community Services Department. He can be reached at liam.o'mahony@chandleraz.gov.

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